

New York Society Library,
New York City.
New York Co.

HABS No. 4-13

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

District No. 4
Southern New York State

REDUCED COPIES OF MEASURED DRAWINGS

Historic American Buildings Survey
Wm. Dewey Foster, District Officer,
25 West 45th Street, New York City.

Location and Date

At the end of March, 1854, the New York Society Library completed its one hundredth year. It was in need of a building of its own, the two which it had previously owned and occupied having been sold successively for timely reasons, and each time the books had been placed in rented rooms in public buildings where the functions of the Library were continued. Out of debt, and possessing a fund of nearly \$70,000, an arrangement had been made in May, 1853, by a committee of the trustees with Mrs. Adeline E. Schermerhorn, widow of Peter Augustus Schermerhorn, a former trustee, for the purchase of three lots owned by her on the east side of University Place between 12th and 13th Streets. The price agreed upon was \$18,650, with certain conditions, the trustees agreeing not to erect within 40 feet of the front of the premises any building unless of brick or stone of at least two stories in height, and not to erect or permit on the premises "any public school, theatre or other place for public amusement, or any other place for any other trade, business, or occupation, dangerous, noxious or offensive to the neighboring inhabitants".

See A. B. Keep's Hist. of the N. Y. Society Library,
1908, pp. 436, 437, 442.

Active steps toward building were taken after the annual meeting of 1854, a committee being empowered to have plans and estimates prepared at once and to call for bids. By March, 1855, the trustees had ratified the choice of Messrs. E. Thomas & Son, as architects and had approved mason's and carpenter's contracts.

Ibid., 443.

During the summer of 1855, the cornerstone was laid, and the trustees



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met in the almost finished structure on April 28, 1856.

Ibid,, 444-445.

The building's address at that time was No. 67 University Place, but house numbers were changed in 1897 and this became No. 109 and so remains.

Description and Cost

A good description of the new building was published in "Valentine's Manual" for 1856 soon after it was completed. It is here quoted in full, with bracketed insertions made by the architects of the present survey to indicate corrections in statement or changes that have been made in details of plan and construction since the building was erected:

"The new building has 52 feet front, leaving a space unoccupied on either side so as to give light by windows to the interior. Toward the rear, however, the building spreads out and covers the whole width of the lot. [The land has a width of 71 feet in front and 79 feet 3 inches at the rear. Its depth is about 110 feet. The building's width at the rear is 77 feet 3 inches].

"The front is in the Italian style of architecture. The entrance is ornamented with coupled Corinthian pilasters, supporting the entablature, over which is a balustrade [removed prior to 1910], inclosing a small balcony. The [entrance] door is surrounded by an architrave with keystone [keyblock]. The wall is faced with ashlar, with horizontal grooves cut into it [rusticated stone jointings], and supports a cornice. Above the first story is a pedestal, on which rest the piers and window ornaments. The angles of the piers have rustic [rusticated] quoins running up to the cornice at the top of the building.

"The windows in the side divisions are [have] ornamented architraves



and pilasters supporting consols [consoles] which in turn support the cornice and pediment. The middle window contains a triple window with Corinthian pilasters and entablature, in the frieze of which is the inscription 'Founded A.D. 1754'. Over the windows are stone panels. Those in the side divisions are filled with ornaments. The one over the middle window contains the name of the building, 'Society Library'.

"The walls are faced with fine [repressed] bricks, above which is a massive entablature of iron, consisting of an architrave, frieze and cornice; over which is a continued balustrade [removed prior to 1910] between pedestals. [The architraves, quoins, front steps and other stonework are of brownstone].

"On entering the front door, the visitor finds himself in a hall 47 feet long [including the vestibule at the front] and 12 [feet] wide, handsomely paved with tessellated pavement [blue and yellow encaustic tile]. On the left is a comfortable room for a ladies' reading room, 16 feet by 30 [now the janitor's quarters with a north-and-south partition making two rooms]. A similar room on the right is used as a conversation room [now the Trustees' Room]. At the end of the hall are folding doors opening into the large reading room, 31 feet by 73, well lighted and furnished with papers and periodicals [now the stack-room with wooden stacks].

"In the hall near the entrance to the large reading room, an easy flight of stairs leads to the library, which offers to view a noble apartment [now the reading room], [about] 35 feet high, and taking in the whole depth and width of the building, having [including] pleasant and quiet alcoves below, with two galleries rising above and receding



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as they rise, leading the eye up to the oblong dome of the roof, that with its fine large skylight sends down a flood of light on all below. The galleries are also divided into alcoves, and the whole building is most conveniently and comfortably arranged, affording room for 100,000 volumes".

See Manual of the Corporation of the City of New-York for 1856, by David T. Valentine, pp. 445-448.

The cost of the structure approximated \$55,560. Including the price paid for the land, the total expenditures amounted to about \$75,000.

Keep, 442-446.

Changes in the Use of Rooms

There has been no remodelling except the few simple changes necessitated by changing use. The front room at the left of the entrance, known all along as the "Ladies Reading Room" and other apartments on the first floor have been diverted from their original purposes by leases to individuals of acceptably high character or to prominent business concerns and societies. All of these tenants, occupying the rooms temporarily from 1859 to well into the eighties, are mentioned by Dr. Keep in his exhaustive history. The "Ladies Reading Room" was cut in two in May, 1892, the inner division with new doorway into the hall retaining the old name. Both divisions are now the janitor's quarters. Across the hallway, the south room, variously styled the "Men's Reading Room", the "Conversation Room" and the "Chess Room", became in June, 1899, a rendezvous for the Society of Colonial Dames.

Keep, 507-508.

This is now the Trustees' Room.



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Improvements have been made to beautify the building or to accommodate new accessions of books and other collections. This is notably true of changes made at the centre of the south side of the reading room, on the second floor, where a bay-window, higher flooring, panelled cabinet-work, coffered ceiling, and stained glass window of great artistic value have been added to the three alcoves devoted to the John C. Green Memorial Collection. Many rare books, manuscripts, official documents, early American newspapers and other valuable literary properties have been acquired from time to time throughout the long life of the Society Library. Among these is one of the best architectural collections in New York.

Ibid, 527.

The Library's Earlier Years

The first library known to have been in New York City was the Trinity Parish Library (1698). Nearly all destroyed in the fire of 1776, the books that survived are now in the library of the General Theological Seminary, except Lord Clarendon's history which is in the Society Library.

The second library was the small collection of books given by Chaplain John Sharpe in 1713 to found a "Publick Library". These books remained in private hands until they probably were united with the Corporation Library in 1730. A few of its volumes are now in the Society Library.

The third library, the Corporation Library (1730), was the city's first real public circulating library; but its books were scattered by the British in 1776.

The fourth library, the New York Society Library, was founded in 1754 and incorporated in 1772 as a public, subscription, circulating



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library. "Practically exterminated by the atrocious vandalism of the British troops", Dr. Keep states, "scarcely a volume of its pre-Revolutionary collection is known to have survived save the Sharpe books, which, as part of the Corporation Library, were formerly in its care".

The founding of all these libraries is summarized, with original authorities cited,

in I. N. Phelps Stokes' Iconography of Manhattan Island, Vol. IV., pp. 404-5,

in a Chronology having cross-references to their respective dates and histories.

From 1754 onward, the detailed accounts of the Society Library's beginning, its growth, accessions of books, migrations, the business of its Trustees, its internal operation, etc., are found in

Keep's History (1908) and Stokes's Iconography (Vol. IV, 1922, and Vol. V, 1925).

The former prints in full (pp. 535-537) the original proposal and resolution defining the plan of organization and operation of the Library as found in the "Articles of the Subscription Roll of the New York Library", written in the book of trustees' minutes under date of April 2, 1754. The first meeting of the library subscribers was held on April 30, 1754, for the election of trustees, in the coffee-room of the Exchange at the foot of Broad Street, -- the same building (suitably altered) where in 1790 the United States Supreme Court held its first sessions.

The New York Society Library is "by far the oldest library in this state," Keep says (p. 527); but

O'Callaghan, in his History of New Netherland, I: 454,



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mentions one in Rensselaerswyck (Albany) as early as 1642. Based on 15 - the early dates of collections of books which the Society Library acquired, 1713 being the earliest, the statement is sometimes made that it is the oldest public library in the United States. From its beginning in 1754, it has been denominated a public library as distinguished from existing private or parochial collections. Nevertheless, it has always been a shareholder's or proprietary, subscription library, not free.

Keep, 468.

It is therefore conservative and exclusive. "It is a conspicuous asset to the cultural life of the community".

Ibid, 532.

The situation of its new building of 1854-6 on University Place, only one block from Fifth Avenue and the same from Broadway, near Washington Square on the south and Union Square on the North, it was for years in the heart of the choice residential section of the city. "So it was natural that the library should have figured as a social rendezvous, as well as a Mecca for booklovers".

Ibid, 476-477.

As Keep said in 1908 (P. 501) offices and retail establishments now reign supreme in University Place. People who in infancy and youth "scampered over the brownstone steps of the Society Library" have long since been forced, like their fathers before them, to sell their homes. "The library building, with the stately Schermerhorn mansion by its side in a loyal companionship of over fifty years, still maintains its quiet dignity amidst all change of scene". That was in 1908. Now an apartment house fills the place of ^{the} neighborly old mansion.

Written, April 12, 1934 by

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

Thomas W. Hotchkiss

118 Pine St., Peekskill, N.Y. 1936, H.C.F.

Reviewed

Approved:

Mrs. Bruce F. Felt

